

The Politics of Trauma and Resistance in Diop's *At Night All Blood Is Black*

Book Review

David Diop's *At Night All Blood Is Black*.

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David Diop is a French novelist of Senegalese descent. *At Night All Blood Is Black* is his second novel which was first published in French as *Frère d'âme* on the 16th of August, 2018. The English translation of the novel was done by Anna Moschovakis and published in November 2020. The translation later went on to win the 2021 International Booker Prize. Diop's novel deals with the life of Alpha Ndiaye and through him that of Mademba, his *more-than-brother*. Set against the colonial backdrop Diop's *At Night All Blood Is Black* deals with grief, violence, and death caused by the World War. It is as much the story of the violence of war as it is of the quotidian life of a Senegalese villager far removed from the settings of the French metropolis and the war.

Language, rather its persistent wilful acknowledgment of lack makes felt the violence in Alfa's narration. Enlivened by trauma, enriched in expression, and yet so frugal in its diction, the sense of urgency that pervades throughout is made more palpable by the stark contrast in the historicity of the narrator's circumstances and his conscious inner monologue which is often punctuated by the refrain – God's Truth. Alfa's act of resistance almost reads like obstinate

abjection of his actions whilst seeking control over his need to *act*. At one level Diop engages the age-old question of the natives' (the lack of) rights within the ambit of the colonialist discourse subsumed by the immediacy of the World Wars. But a more careful reading makes evident the very condition of the natives' way of life, where the supremacy of the sovereign master does not exist as intrusions, rather as the symbol of the ever pervading, ever correcting power-omnipresent and omnipotent. It is within the confines of this overarching social structure that the author juxtaposes the circumstances of the narrator's life. The sequence of Alfa's narration runs parallel to the violence inherent in the novel, accentuated by Mademba, his *more-than-brother's* death. One might even suggest that Alfa began unraveling through the act of witnessing Mademba's death.

It is also through Mademba's gruesome death that the author seeks to introduce the dynamics of necropolitics inherent in the novel and questions the very essence of morality that runs deep within the society as evident in Alfa's laments: "But I thought of my old father, of my mother, of the inner voice that commands us all, and I couldn't cut the barbed wire of his suffering." Thrice Mademba begs of him to end his misery, but Alfa refuses. Aware of his friend's imminent death, the narrator still feels bound by duty to not take a fellow man's life, his *more-than-brother's* life, be that the injuries sustained were grave. The aggrieved narrator finds himself in a position where he must choose between two sets of conflicting obligations, that of preserving Mademba's honor and right to die with dignity by alleviating his pain and killing him, against that of his duty to not "be the *hand* responsible for his more-than-brother's death." The rationality behind Alfa's choice may be up for debate, and one may question his idea of morality. One may also contend that Mademba's life had already been arrogated by the very sovereignty that promises to bestow the gift of citizenship over them instead of their service through war.

Michel Foucault in his *The Will To Knowledge* writes that “The sovereign exercised his right of life only by exercising his right to kill, or by refraining from killing; he evidenced his power over life only through the death he was capable of requiring.” Foucault explains this through the Hobbesian idea of the “transfer of power to the prince” of the natural right of every individual to protect himself. As such the entity of the sovereign as a juridical being finds itself privileged over that of its “citizens.” This is evinced by the slaughter of the seven traitorous Toubabs under the orders of Captain Armand, the representative of the sovereign state. Mademba's death may then be said to be the design of the state, manifested in the gruesomeness of the battlefield.

The mastery of Diop's story-telling can only be gauzed when one seeks to prod the multiple layers that the author has stacked together. Thus, when Madembe expresses his wish to become a French citizen- “Alfa, the world is big, I want to see it. The war is a chance to leave Gandiol. God willing, we will return safe and sound. When we become French citizens...” we chance upon the mundane translating into the realm of the precarious through the Subaltern narrative.

James C. Scott in his essay *False Consciousness or Laying It on Thick?* explains –

The thick version claims that a dominant ideology works its magic by persuading subordinate groups to believe actively in the values that explain and justify their own subordination... The thin theory of false consciousness, on the other hand, maintains only that the dominant ideology achieves compliance by convincing subordinate groups that the social order in which they live is natural and inevitable. The thick theory claims consent; the thin theory settles for resignation.

Diop has managed to perpetuate the image of the “savage Negroes, cannibal, Zulus,” whom the white men fears, through the madness of Alfa’ grief. Even as Alfa is made out to be the devourer of souls, the *dëmm*, he is aware of the irony of his condition. Alfa notes –

For the captain, life is war. The captain loves war the way men love a capricious woman. The captain indulges war shamelessly. He showers war with presents, he spoils her with countless soldiers’ lives. The captain is a devourer of souls. I know, I understand that Captain Armand was a *dëmm* who needed his wife, war, to survive, just the way she needed a husband like him to support her.

As Fanon had pointed out, “the settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil.” The native’s belief in Fate, points Fanon, absolves the oppressor of all blame. Thus, the native accepts his condition as “ordained by God.” It is through the well-defined “dynamism of the libido” that the magical superstructure permeates the native society. This is also made visible in Diop’s narrative when Alfa recounts that he was aware of the law that “a boy and a girl from the same age set do not make love.” But these taboos and rituals are internal to the native society. Unlike Scott, Fanon argues that these inhibitions are already rooted in the native. So when Madembe wishes to see the world and be a “someone” (which here is the ideal of a French citizen), we see this very idea at play, that of a legitimizing force that adheres to the colonialist way of life, while simultaneously relegating the native society to a more undesirable subjugated position. The dynamics of capital and its role in the creation of hegemony finds further expression in the text through the character of Abdou Thiam, the village chief, who decrees that the village of Gabdoil must thence grow peanuts, a product highly sought after in the colonial capitalist market; a decision whose impact would have had consequences past that of the individual lives of Alfa and

Madembe. “Cultivate peanuts instead”, decrees Abdou Thiam, “for peanuts meant more money for everyone.” And in return, the chief would exempt the villagers from their corvees. It is Alfa's father, the old Bassirou Ndiaye, who sees reason and opposes the chief's designs, perhaps symbolic of the tussle between the universalizing juggernaut of capitalism and that of native subsistence.

The image of the native Negro savage here stands conflated with that of the blue-eyed Taubabs in the theatre of war, performed within the *la terre a personne* (no man's land). These men must enact their stories within the bounds of the *la terre a personne*, vague accounts of which would seldom find mention past those trenches. All must play their roles to perfection, with pretensions of madness and valor. But come the end of the day, when the soldiers must retreat to their sovereign wombs drawn over blood-soaked mud, the men must also forgo their madness. Within the trenches, these are superstitious men, fearful of death. But Alfa refuses to follow this distinction. He thrives within the no-man's land. Alfa perpetually seeks to re-enact the events of the *la terre a personne*. Through this re-enactment of violence, Alfa seeks to perform his version of that *humanity* which he could not afford his closest friend, his *more-than-brother*. And there-in, he incurs the reputation of the soldier-sorcerer- the devourer of souls. Diop further uses the image of a sleeping baby being carried to the trench that looks like the “slightly parted sex of an immense woman's sex.” This affliction to the natal event, rather its reversal, draws parallels to the sovereign's perverted parental role. The *sleeping baby* can only find the open grave of the trench, forever vulnerable. Where Adriana Cavarero determines the baby as the “fragile totality of her exposure,” dependent on the other for its *story*, Diop turns that on its head. Though Mademba's story finds voice through the Alfa, his other, it is the very fact of Mademba's non-exclusivity that Diop presses on. While Cavarero argues that “the baby who is born is

always unique and one,” Diop perverts that to show a dead Mademba, who in the event of his death finds affirmation; the event of the birth has thus been overtaken by the business of death, made to perform through memory and the supernatural.

A careful reading of Diop’s *At Night All Blood Is Black* does raise several pertinent issues, which, although rooted in the colonial era still finds itself relevant in the present context. Diop’s narrative transcends the requirement of the mere monologue by infusing urgency into the action inherent within the story, and in certain ways, imparting legitimacy to the whole historiography of death and violence contained within the text.

Bionote

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